I launched the Privilege and Policy at Wesleyan series in September of 2013 in an effort to identify key issues and student-proposed solutions in five principal areas of identity at Wesleyan: class; race; culture, ethnicity, and religion; ability and wellness; and sex, gender, and relationships. Wesleyan has throughout its history taken great strides toward building openness and opportunity for all students; however, unresolved issues create barriers to success. The five forums in this series sought to identify these problems and recommend solutions. One or more Wesleyan students with experience in each given area led the corresponding forum, which were open to all students and attended by over 150 students in total, with dozens more contributing via email. This report was compiled from the accounts they provided.

The following report can by no means encompass all problems of privilege at Wesleyan, but rather seeks to highlight some of the more pressing issues and recommendations for change.
Privilege and Policy: Recurring Themes

Listed below are recurring themes that arose in several (or all) of the Privilege and Policy forums.

Key Issues

- **Exotification and tokenization of students from “diverse” backgrounds.**
  - Diversity at Wesleyan is touted to the point that many students feel more like commodities than like students.

- **A dearth of coherent dialogue – student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and student-to-administrator.**
  - In the class discussion, for example, many participants noted it as their first time speaking about these issues, let alone in a formal setting, and wished for more avenues to do so.

- **A marked absence of key groups at discussions of privilege – specifically, many students of privilege.**
  - While a core group of students engage in countless discussions and efforts toward change, the inability to reach many, less personally affected students stymies these efforts.

- **The community’s difficulty recovering from community-damaging events.**
  - The Wesleyan community suffers from a general lack of forgiveness of one another in the wake of mistakes, public or private – prime examples being the [Holi incident](#) and [assault](#) by Public Safety officers, both in 2012. The problem is partly due to the absence of dialogue, including official messaging from the University during and after such events, and partly to an unwillingness to understand the backgrounds and intentions of others.

Recommendations

- **Create an official channel for institutional messaging.**
  - Administrative responses, when present, are scattered across Argus and Wesleying articles, official blogs, and all-campus emails. A singular, official digital channel for messaging would better facilitate information transmission and, subsequently, deeper understanding of campus issues.

- **Mandate sensitivity and diversity training for all faculty and staff.**
  - Traditionally, faculty trainings have been strictly voluntary, the effects of which are experienced acutely by students in classrooms, office hours, meetings, and other communications.

- **Institutionalize an annual Day of Dialogue.**
  - Student efforts to create such a day, on which classes would be cancelled and all would be invited to discuss pertinent issues, fizzled during discussions of a new academic calendar during the 2012-2013 academic year.

- **Continue efforts to increase diversity in hiring and admissions.**
  - Though some call Wesleyan “Diversity University,” community members are overwhelmingly white, liberal, and wealthy.

- **Develop a new means of incident reporting.**
  - The current mechanism of incident reporting – the Campus Climate Log – is underutilized, virtually unread, and often forgotten.
Privilege and Policy: Class

Key Issues

Academic
- Low-income students’ inability to select a major without worrying about future employment
  - Often, heavy work-study loads preclude some highly employable tracks (e.g., premed)
- High loans as an impediment to academic success
- Skill gaps among students who attended high schools with fewer resources
  - Including difficulty seeking help when struggling, using office hours, formal emails

Institutional
- Burdens caused by costs not covered by financial aid
  - Including mandatory insurance, travel, textbooks, for-credit music lessons, food over breaks, cold-weather clothing, storage of possessions
- Working at Wesleyan
  - The stress of needing (rather than wanting) to have a job on campus
  - The dynamics of work-study and serving your peers
  - The need to work over the summer– and inability to take valuable, unpaid internships
  - Low wages for work-study students
  - High frequency of labor-based, low-skill jobs reserved for work-study
  - Difficulty of joining resume-building activities due to heavy work-study loads
- Absence of mentorship among faculty, administration, and peers around socioeconomic issues
- Policy inflexibility in response to differing financial ability (e.g., for housing, meal plan)
- Lack of centralized point person (and advocate) on campus for all financial issues
- Low likelihood of ability to earn (and pay) the full student or work-study contribution
- Framing of the institutional conversation about how to attract low-income students rather than how to improve the experience of students already on-campus

Social
- Lack of solidarity on campus across class divides
- Students’ constant awareness of issues of class/classism
- Stigma related to admissions on both ends of the economic spectrum
- Negative student responses to proposals recommending that all students to work on campus – despite the fact that many students already are required to work
- Conflict over distribution of jobs to work-study and non-work-study students
- Culture shock of first coming to Wesleyan, having been unable to afford college visits

Recommendations
- Increase promotion of resources, such as job listings, financial literacy, emergency funds
- Expand Career Center resources and networks for acquiring paid, living wage jobs
- Establish singular point person/advocate in administration for issues of class
- Increase faculty-student mentorship around low-income backgrounds
- Consider reallocation of work-study funds – i.e., making more resume-building campus jobs into exclusively work-study positions
- Reconsider nature of financial aid package (including firm cap on work-study and student contribution expectations and higher travel fund)
- Increase Deans’ Office emergency discretionary funding
- Initiate events to build solidarity among the low-income student community
- Expand data collection regarding class-based problems (outside tuition costs, jobs, etc.)
Privilege and Policy: Race

Key Issues

Academic
- **Lower graduation rates** among students of color, especially African American students
- Low numbers of faculty of color – particularly tenured faculty of color
  - Lack of faculty of color available to serve as mentors
    - Inability of faculty of color to dedicate time to mentorship while seeking tenure
- Failure of faculty to intervene when academic discussions about race become intolerant

Institutional
- Assumption that students of color speak for all of the student-of-color (SOC) community (in committees, conferences, open forums, jobs, etc.)
- Lack of political and financial support for the Office of Diversity
- Segregation of students by background in program housing (and resulting stereotypes)
  - *Note:* program houses are often highly necessary safe spaces for identity groups but can have unintended negative consequences for them and the community at large
- Assumption that faculty of color will teach about issues of color, and pressure to do so given the current curriculum gaps
- Safety issues on campus for students of color
  - Public Safety, MPD, the Ride

Social
- Stereotype threat (fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s group)
- Assumptions made about culture, class, and upbringing based on race
- Sense of exclusion from identity groups and SOC community based on appearance, perspective, or origin
- Racial segregation in classes, housing, jobs, dining, and social groups
- Disengagement of majority of students from conversations about race

Recommendations
- Prioritize higher the financial needs of diversity, including the Office of Diversity and programs to involve the whole student body in programming
- Increase promotion of access to alumni SOC professional networks
- Be aware of color in hires and retention, both faculty and administrative
- Mandate training for faculty about race and the importance of intervening during classroom discussions that become overly triggering
  - Include multi-constituent group training with students present
- Encourage integration of individuals of color into curriculum
- Institutionalize formal recognition of faculty mentorship and involvement in student development in tenure decisions
- Consider needs of SOC community when discussing all policy changes
- Provide ongoing, punctual follow-up (emails, events, policy changes) after events like the Fall 2012 Diversity University forum
- Launch institutional conversation between students, faculty, administrators, and alumni about strengths and weaknesses of the student-of-color program and challenges of the SOC experience
Privilege and Policy: Culture, Ethnicity, and Religion

Key Issues

Academic
- Assumption that students can speak for a given background based on perceived ethnicity/origin
- Differing cultural norms defining academic property and academic honesty
- Students facing cultural norms against seeking help
- Dominance of white, Western males in curriculum
- Lack of foreign-born or religious faculty
- Hostility toward religion by faculty – including within the Religion department
- Absence of religious diversity within Religion department

Institutional
- Lack of support for international students
  - Lack of services over breaks for students who can’t afford to fly home
  - Lack of programming to support cultural adjustment and overcoming language barriers
  - Lack of sensitivity to foreign cultural stressors
  - Expectation that part-time associate dean and full-time coordinator serve >200 students
- Assumption that parents are engaged, pro-higher education, and available in the case of academic challenges, time away from Wesleyan, etc.
- Existence of institutionalized support for certain cultural groups but not others – for example, strong support for African American students but less for students from the African Diaspora
- Absence of requirement that faculty grant students time off for religious holidays upon request
- Lack of religious diversity among students
- Lack of dining options for students with culturally or religiously mandated dietary restrictions

Social
- Student-of-color community that doesn’t represent or support all backgrounds
- Lack of consciousness or respect for differing values among the student body
- Predominance of vocally anti-religious views among students
- Stigma against and lack of social support for students with religious beliefs/practices
- Assumptions about students’ political views (e.g., abortion and same-sex marriage) based on religious views and geographic background
- Conflation of political conservatism with ignorance and bigotry

Recommendations
- Increase money and resources for the Office of International Students
  - Establish an International Studies Internship for further programming coordination
- Increase discussion at Orientation about ethnicity, religion, and other aspects of identity
- Create new “Meet a Wesleyan Student” videos focused on who we are, not what activities we do
- Mandate sensitivity training for faculty about religion and cultures
- Prioritize religious and political diversity in both faculty hires and admissions
- Require that faculty grant time off from classes for religious holidays upon request
- Deliberately consider religious holidays in designing new academic calendars
- Increase funding for dietary restrictions
Privilege and Policy: Ability and Wellness

“As an institution, Wesleyan’s assumption is that to be a Wesleyan student is a single ability, when in fact, it consists of many thousands of abilities. As soon as a student cannot complete one of those tasks without assistance, support, or accommodation, ze is no longer recognized as a full and complete Wesleyan student, and is treated as incapable.” - student at Ability and Wellness Forum

Key Issues

Academic
- Competition for time between health and academics
- Wide-spread (and unacknowledged) high anxiety levels surrounding academics and social life
- Faculty surprise, confusion, or lack of empathy about disability / accommodations
- Faculty insensitivity while speaking about disability (especially neurological disability)
- Classroom stigma against students with visible accommodations
- Inability to cite mental health as reason for seeking penalty-free course withdrawal

Institutional
- Inaccessibility of campus to students or visitors with visual, hearing, or mobility impairments
- Difficulty and costs of getting documented with a disability
- Bureaucratic hurdles that dissuade students from pursuing academic accommodations
- Reliance on relatively untrained resident advisors to detect mental health issues in student body
- Medical leave policy issues
  ♦ Loss of power over decision-making once a health problem is recognized
  ♦ Students told to leave Wesleyan because they constitute a liability
  ♦ Disparities in the ease of the medical leave process
    - Transient physical problems vs. long-term or psychological issues
  ♦ Policy’s assumption that time at home will be good, useful, and supportive recovery time
  ♦ Loss of health care once on leave if on Wesleyan health insurance
  ♦ Loss of financial aid (scholarships, deferment of loans) while on leave
  ♦ Lack of clarity about reevaluation criteria for return from leave
  ♦ Unreasonable number of meetings required upon return from leave to re-enroll
    - And lack of support for returning students’ adjustment back to campus

Social
- The perception of coping as a matter of strength
- The Wesleyan-promoted expectation that you will do [7 (or more) activities at once]
- Lack of risk identification systems, safety nets
- Insensitivity to ability in community language and discourse

Recommendations
- Market the prioritization of wellness - Wesleyan students are more than their accomplishments
- Conduct thorough review of all medical leave processes with input from students who have returned (or chosen not to return) from leave
  ♦ Establish peer student advisors to guide students through medical leave process
- Mandate faculty training on neurodiversity, disability, mental health, and sensitivity
- Reevaluate policies regarding communication with faculty about accommodations
- Establish discretionary funding for low-income students seeking testing for accommodations
- Streamline the process of seeking accommodations pre-matriculation
- Permit a single doctor’s note to cover multiple accommodations
Privilege and Policy: Sex, Gender, and Relationships

Key Issues

Academic
- Gender imbalances in different academic departments, caused by:
  - Faculty gender imbalances across different departments
  - Lack of student-student mentorship due to preexisting department imbalances
  - Imbalances of participation and speaking time in class by gender
  - Gendered stereotypes about departments
- Failure of faculty to ask for preferred pronouns and name at start-of-year
- Unaddressed sexist and heteronormative comments from faculty

Institutional
- Absence of spaces that are not dominated by men, particularly for large weekend events
  - University refusal to allow sorority housing, despite continued support for fraternities
- Scarcity of gender-neutral spaces (particularly bathrooms, locker rooms) for trans*, gender-nonconforming students
- Difficulty of officially changing name and gender on Wesleyan network and with registrar
- Flaws in prioritization of survivors’ needs in institutional response to sexual assault
- Lack of understanding of and support for gender-nonconforming students

Social
- Prevalence and severity of sexual assault problem on campus
- Violence that trans* people fear or experience in gendered spaces
- Assumption that alcohol consumption indicates desire for sex
- Domination of “hookup culture” in weekend night spaces, especially in queer community
  - Absence of spaces for students with alternative weekend preferences
- Sexual targeting of younger students and prospective students by upperclassmen
- Inadequate recognition of need for bystander intervention in risky situations

Recommendations
- Mandate training for faculty and staff about sexism, heterosexism, and gender issues
- Increase pipeline programs to diversify academic departments, particularly in STEM
- Assemble more internships and professional networks for women in STEM
- Market diverse profiles of academic departments and why highlighted students chose those majors – especially if breaking gender-based convention
  - Increase mentorship for female students in male-dominated majors
- Create more spaces not dominated by men, including at least one sorority house (as long as fraternities remain in existence) and a Gender Resource Center
- Create easily accessible gender-neutral bathrooms in every building
- Streamline process for changing name and gender on Wesleyan network and with registrar
- Engender stronger culture of caring for others, beginning at Orientation
- Increase community-based events in neutral spaces
- Continue reevaluation of sexual assault response policies, with greater input from survivors and accused students